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MX Decision Can Make, Break SALT

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WASHINGTON — The restraints of SALT I did not prevent the Soviets from spending about \$100 billion more than the U.S. on military preparations in the last decade, and the resulting decline in our strategic leverage is reflected in our current dealings with Cuba.

Carter officials are frank to admit that the real reason why the U.S. does not insist on the immediate removal of MIG 23s and Russian attack submarines from Cuba is not our uncertainty as to their presence. Rather, they fear such a demand would provoke a brusque Soviet rejection which would only dramatize our humiliating inability to react.

Sen. Sam Nunn, D-Ga., is urging that the U.S. must now substantially increase its spending on strategic and conventional armament to reverse the existing trend toward Russian superiority. He believes this to be an urgent necessity, whether or not SALT II is ratified.

The very high upper limits that SALT II sets on MIRVed ICBM launchers means that the Soviets can continue the deployment of enough heavy missiles with multiple warheads to threaten the survivability of our Minuteman missiles. Two thirds of our land-based missiles are already vulnerable, and by as early as 1981 the Soviets are judged to be able to take out 90 percent of our ICBMs while retaining two-thirds of their warheads in reserve to hold our urban population hostage.

The chance to protect the survivability of our silo-based missiles was lost when the Soviets in early 1977 turned down President Carter's proposal to cut in half the number of heavy missiles to be allowed them under SALT II. From that time on, it was clear that only a crash program to get our ICBMs out of their doomed silos and to make them mobile could save the land-based leg of our strategic triad.

Moreover, the grim arithmetic provided by intelligence proved that we would need a heavier and more accurate ICBM if the U.S. was to be able to retaliate effectively against a large number of missiles the Russians would have in reserve in hardened silos.

George Ball, former under secretary of state, has ridiculed the argument that we should be seriously concerned by the growing vulnerability of our land-based missiles. The capacity of our submarines at sea and bombers on alert to destroy Russian cities combined with the basic uncertainty of nuclear war would be enough, he maintains, to deter the Soviets from launching a first strike.

Having set up a straw man, Ball effectively knocks him down. The danger is not that the Soviets will promptly launch a pre-emptive strike as soon as they see that our land-based missiles are highly vulnerable and that theirs are not. The real danger is that their perception of American nuclear inferiority will tempt them to threaten the use of their advantage in conventional forces in any serious confrontation or regional crisis.

During the seven years of SALT I, the U.S. has allowed the situation that prevailed at the time of the Cuban missile crisis in 1962 to be completely reversed. Then, the U.S. had both local conventional superiority and overwhelming nuclear advantage, and the Russians were forced to back down. Now the shoe is shifting to the other foot, and by their buildup in Europe and use of proxy armies in the Third World the Soviets are presenting us with a mounting challenge.

These dark perspectives lie behind the demand of Sen. Nunn and other fence sitters in the SALT debate that Carter move promptly to construct the large and more accurate MX missile and deploy it in a mobile basing mode. These senators want across-the-board strengthening of our defenses, but they see the MX decision as a critical test of Carter's intentions on which their support of SALT may well stand or fall.

Faced by a budgetary deadline, Carter must make next month a decision that he has dangerously delayed for two years, so that at best the new missile will not be available in significant numbers until 1987. His delay has widened to at least five years the window of opportunity that the

By choosing to proceed with the MX, Carter will strengthen the chances for SALT ratification because he will gain many more votes than he will lose. By deciding against the MX, he will almost certainly doom SALT and seriously weaken our defense posture in the bargain.